

Spate of attacks on farms follows long 'contra' lull

By Paul Goepfert 6/6/86
Special to The Sun

LA DALIA, Nicaragua — Erupting suddenly after months of relative calm in the mountains of Nicaragua, the U.S.-backed "contras" unleashed a wave of attacks here during May, primarily at cooperative farms.

The heaped graves with rough-cut crosses, the charred remains of peasant houses, schools and health centers as well as the twisted metal of mined trucks mark the end of a six-month lull in the bloodshed, following the Sandinista claim of a "strategic defeat" of the contras.

In the latest of these attacks, May 31, on the farming cooperative Daniel Teller Paz near La Dalia in eastern Matagalpa, 16 peasants died, including a 9-year-old girl, and 22 were wounded, including 10 children and nine women. Fourteen houses and a school, recently built with assistance from Swiss construction workers and foreign aid, were burned to the ground.

Centeno Estrada, 27, head of the co-op's self-defense militia, described the attack of about 150 contras that began at dawn with a rain of mortar fire from the surrounding hills:

"The 21 men with guns ran for the trenches. The women and children ran for the underground shelters. We held them for awhile, but then we began to run out of ammunition, and they reached the houses and began setting them afire.

"Some of the women and children had not reached the shelters, so we had to go into the open to help them escape. You can see the bloodstains here where my companions died. When we were only two with ammu-

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Spate of 'contra' attacks shatters calm on co-ops

CONTRAS, from 1A

nition, we began to pray as we fired. Then we heard the gunfire of reinforcements, and the contras began to leave, cursing us and shouting they would be back to finish us off."

The attack left 11 widows and 38 orphans. One of those orphans, Alejandro Hernandez, 9, said, "We were huddled in the dark of the refuge hole, and the contras came and sprayed the hole with rifle fire. Then everyone began to wail and cry. 'We are women and children, for the love of God, don't shoot.' Then the contras threw a couple of grenades down the hole and the people were wounded by the shrapnel."

Leaders of the Nicaraguan Democratic Forces contra group, or FDN, have claimed that the farming cooperatives are military and not civilian targets because the peasant farmers on them are armed.

Mr. Estrada countered, "Of course we are armed. We are defending ourselves and our farms. But we are not soldiers. We're farmers who never had any land or a decent living before this cooperative. I'm the only one who ever served in the army and I taught the others how to shoot."

On the same day, three nearby co-ops were attacked. Since April 28, 12 cooperatives have been attacked, six of them burned. A number of them are receiving construction funds from European aid organizations, and volunteer workers from various European countries were present during a few of the attacks.

The most spectacular case was the May 18 attack on the Jacinto Baco cooperative in Nueva Guinea, when eight West German volunteer workers were kidnapped by the attacking contra forces. The FDN has

publicly acknowledged the kidnapping.

The mining of roads by the contras in the northern regions also has dramatically increased in the last month. On May 24, a rebel mine caused the death of a Spanish health worker, Ambrosio Mogorron, and nine peasants, who were trucking in polio vaccinations to isolated villages near San Jose de Bocay. Sixteen other civilians have died from mines and another 10 in highway ambushes in May.

Lt. Daniel Sosa, spokesman for the Sandinista army in Matagalpa, acknowledged the dramatic surge in contra activity but discounted its military significance.

"Yes, they are filtering in again, but our offensive forces them to break up into small, marauding bands on the run, pursued by the army, unwilling to fight and unable to mount a military offensive," he said of the contras.

Young Alejandro Hernandez, standing next to the bloodstained trench where his father died, cried as he recalled his terror during the contra attack but said he wouldn't leave.

"My father had just planted the corn and beans before he died. That's what he left me. The rest was burned. It's up to me now to harvest."